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ABSTRACT

This paper looks at older adults' use of books and the public library, synthesizes and analyzes work completed in this area, and offers recommendations for future studies. A review was performed of the U.S., Canadian, and British literature over the past 20 years on the use of library materials by older adults. The literature review is divided into four sections: (1) Reading Preferences of Older Adults; (2) The Influence of Education on Library Use; (3) User and Non-user Studies: Old Age and Library Use; and (4) Aging, Life Satisfaction, and Reading. In addition to a list of references, the following bibliographies are appended: Related Research (including brief annotations on research on the use of books and the public library by older adults); Other Relevant References (materials which may be of interest to those desiring a broader view of older adults' reading habits); and Gerontological References (books and articles dealing with the psychological and sociological, rather than the biological, aspects of aging). (THC)

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How Older Adults Use Books and the Public Library: A Review of the Literature

by

Judith Kamin

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INTRODUCTION

Statement of the Problem

It is traditionally believed that the older the adults, the less they read or use the public library. Today, one out of every nine people in the United States is 65 years or older, and the expectation is that by the year 2000, 12.2% of the population will be over 65.[1] It is the librarian's perception, based largely on limited research, that the older adult is underrepresented proportionately in the user population.

When we speak here of older adults, we are referring to noninstitutionalized individuals who are 65 years and older, literate, sighted, and not physically disabled. Do these older adults read books and magazines and visit the public library less than younger adults and is there statistical evidence to substantiate this belief? This is the first main point on which we need to know the facts. In many cases older persons are retired and free from many of the responsibilities of their past; logically, this gives them more time to pursue leisure activities such as reading. In addition, the public library is an ideal source of recreation for those on fixed incomes, as are many retirees. What discourages older adults from using the public library?

Putting aside obvious considerations such as poor health, failing eyesight, lack of transportation, or inaccessibility or unavailability of a public library, do factors such as education, sex, and socioeconomic status affect library use by older adults? Berelson, in his classic study done nearly 35 years ago, designated the level of formal education as the single most important factor affecting library use.[2] That is to say, the more education individuals have, the more likely they are to use the library. Many older Americans have not received as much education as their younger counterparts. But, if we were to hold the education variable constant (that is, look at library use by adults, younger and older, with the same level of education), would we then see the same amount of library use between these two groups? This is the second main point on which we clearly need evidence.

If older adults did not use the library in their youth, is it reasonable to expect them to use it in their later years? If older adults were not book readers when they were young, is it realistic to assume they will read books now that they have the free time? How does one attract former readers and nonreaders to the public library? This is the third main point on which factual information is needed.

The purpose of this paper then is to look at older adults' use of books and the public library, to synthesize and analyze the work that has been done thus far, and to offer recommendations for future studies so that ultimately librarians can provide options and outlets for older adults and make their longer lives more satisfying.

The Study

This study is divided into two parts. The first is a review of the literature (United States, Canadian and British) over the past 20 years or so on the use of books and public libraries by older adults (we use the term "books" to ecompass all library materials). The second part will be a statistical analysis of several recent surveys that contain data on user/nonuser patterns of behavior. These surveys will be compared with one another to check for agreement or disagreement concerning the findings reached on older adults' use of books and libraries. This analysis is under preparation as of this writing and therefore is not included in this report.

How the Literature Search Was Carried Out

A search was made for relevant literature—substantiated by fact not opinion—on how older adults use books and public libraries. In general, a review of the literature revealed a scarcity of research and systematic study, but a number of publications were rich with ideas on how the public library could improve service to older adults. These suggestions were often based on reports of case experience.

A manual search was made covering the years from 1962 to 1982 of library, education and gerontological literature. *Library and Information Science Abstracts* (LISA), *Library Literature, Information Science Abstracts,* the *Bowker Annual, Current Index to Journals in Education, Resources in Education, Dissertation Abstracts,* and *The Gerontologist* were systematically searched. The subject headings most frequently used in the library periodical indexes were "public libraries—services to senior citizens," "reading—special groups—senior citizens," "surveys—reading interests," "aging," and "aged." The descriptors searched in the educational indexes were "older adults," "public libraries," and "recreational reading." Online searches were conducted using three databases: Dissertation Abstracts (1962-82), LISA (1969-82), and ERIC (Educational Resources Information Center) (1966-82). Many useful citations were found in references and bibliographies accompanying the indexed articles.

This is intended to be a major review of the literature, but it is by no means comprehensive. Articles of peripheral interest or those unsubstantiated by fact have been omitted from the analysis of relevant literature, but some are included in the bibliography. In the process of this 21-year literature review, four items prior to 1962 were found that contribute significantly toward an understanding of how older adults use books and public libraries. Each of these is summarized here, and they appear in the order of judged importance. References to authors and date of publication may be found in the bibliography.

Berelson (1949) presents a synthesis of the studies of public library use from 1930 to 1948. Chapters two and three entitled "Who Uses the Library?" and "Why do People Use the Library?" provide a useful profile of the library user. Berelson found that, "the older the people, the less they use the public library."[3] This, he felt, may be attributed to physical handicaps, to a depleted energy level, or to a desire to avoid new experiences. Berelson concludes that characteristics such as age and economic status are of less importance in predicting who will use the public library than is educational level; the latter is the single most important factor affecting use. Berelson predicted that the steady rise in the average level of education would translate into more extensive use of libraries over the years.[4]

Berelson reaches another noteworthy conclusion: Younger adults borrow more nonfiction than older groups (due to school-related borrowing), but older adults borrow more in the field of social sciences. Education is a contributing factor here because college-educated persons are found to be the heaviest borrowers of nonfiction.

Waples and Tyler (1931) set out to determine the subjects which adults read. Circulation data from public libraries were studied to determine the selection of books made by individuals who were alike in respect to sex, age, amount of schooling, and occupation. It was found that the differences in reading interests do not result from differences in age but rather from differences in schooling, occupation, economic status, etc. When all other factors are held constant, the differences in reading interests resulting from age alone are slight. However, Waples and Tyler determined that older readers were more interested in "mature problems," for example, "problems of the federal government," "the money market," and "conservation of natural resources" while younger readers were interested in problems such as "marriage and divorce," and "education of children."[5]

Hansen, Javes and Nash (1960) reported the findings of a 1959 study of 1700 Minnesota senior citizens 65-90 years of age. Of these, 13% said their hobby

was reading. Newspaper reading was most popular. Histories, autobiographies, and biographies were the kinds of books preferred by older adults. It was interesting and perhaps expected that, "stories which deal with the past ranked first...."[6]

Two hundred rural Mississippians age 60 and over were interviewed by Hoar (1960) to determine their reading habits and preferences. They were asked about their average weekday book reading, when they last read a book, and the number and titles of the books read during the preceding six months. Approximately 60% of the respondents said that they spent no time on the average weekday reading books. Education apparently had a stronger effect upon book reading than age: the more education a person had, the more time he spent reading.[7]

Four Main Themes in the Literature

We turn next to a systematic review of the most important relevant studies from the literature published since 1962. There are four main topics under which these studies will be considered:

1. *Reading preferences.* What do older adults read and how often? What are their reading interests and habits? Are they different from those of younger adults?
2. *Education.* To what extent does formal education influence library use?
3. *User/nonuser studies.* Is the older adult underrepresented in the public library population and, if so, why? What is the relationship between library use and age?
4. *Aging and life satisfaction.* Do older adults' sense of well-being and integration within the society affect their use of books and the public library?

Within each category, literature reviews and bibliographies appear first, followed by reports and studies in order of their judged relevance and importance.

READING PREFERENCES OF OLDER ADULTS

Mann (1977) compiled an annotated bibliography on adult reading habits.[8] It contains grouped selections on various aspects of reading behavior such as "Reading and the Role of the Library," "Research into Reading," and "General Surveys in the U.K. & U.S.A." This bibliography offers a limited section devoted to the elderly reader, which contains five publications.

The whole of the July/September 1979 issue of *Educational Gerontology* is devoted to reading. In it are two literature reviews on the reading interests of older adults. Harvey and Dutton (1979) briefly review ten studies and conclude there is agreement as to what older adults prefer to read.[9] Older adults do not enjoy science fiction books, depressing books, books that are frank about sex or that contain violence, or books that have confusing plots or many characters. Older adults prefer light romance, biographies, westerns, mysteries, travel, the Bible, and newspapers.

Robinson and Haase (1979) selectively review six studies that research the problems of the older reader and his reading interests and habits.[10] The authors briefly describe three national surveys that gathered data on the elderly's reading interests and give overviews on their general reading habits. They also describe three reading programs for older adults and pose questions for future study.

In the January 1973 issue of *Library Trends*, which is devoted to "Library Services to the Aging," Romani (1973) reviews the literature, and describes the results of several studies done nationally and statewide on the reading interests of the elderly.[11] Romani cites statistics showing that retired persons of 65 have increased leisure time and spend more of this leisure time reading than they did prior to retirement.[12] Short articles or stories were preferred to full-length books or novels, and light materials such as romance, mysteries, and religious/inspirational books were favored. Older adults are less likely to be interested in how-to-do-it books, science fiction, or books which contain explicit sex or violent action.

What Do Older Adults Read?

A survey of reading interests of 550 senior citizens 60 years and over and living in mid-Missouri was conducted by Weitkemper (1976). Questionnaires were mailed to the older adults who used the outreach services of the Daniel Boone Regional Library to determine their reading preferences. The categories of books selected most often by older adults in order of interest were: religious/inspirational materials (13%), historical novels (10.4%), biography (8.0%), romances (7.8%), mysteries (6.7%), and westerns (4.8%). Weitkemper noted that the reading interests of the elderly are not confined to "light fiction." Their interests encompass a wide range of subject areas with nonfiction being of major importance.[13]

A case study was done by Ngandu and O'Rourke (1979) of 267 senior citizens, age 60-93, who were members of a dining club in a medium-sized Nebraska city, to gather data about reading as it relates to older adults.

Results showed that elderly adults most frequently read newspapers (76% of all respondents) and magazines (63%). The Bible was identified as the main reading material by 19% of the surveyed group.[14]

Questioning a select group of older adults enrolled in an "elderhostel," Ngandu (1981) confirmed her findings in the 1979 study and again found newspapers to be the most often read material. The study also showed that 32% of the respondents preferred to read about news and world affairs, 28% preferred autobiographies and biographies, and 24% enjoyed reading about history.[15]

Moshey (1972) surveyed 50 retired adult readers from middle and upper middle-class backgrounds living in central New Jersey to determine their reading choices. Of those surveyed, 74% preferred biographies, 67% preferred travel, and 62% preferred fiction. Moshey found that people who have been in professions that require a good deal of reading continue after retirement to read for pleasure in their fields of interest.[16]

Drickhamer (1971) describes a project in Rhode Island in which 67 persons age 65 and older were recruited to review books and recommend those to be placed in a library's collection for older citizens. The reviews indicated an obvious preference for books which had a sympathetic view of life and books that "made time fly." Almost no reviews favored science fiction or books with long descriptions. Books about retirement were not selected, presumably because they felt the time to read about it is before retirement and not after.[17]

How Much Time Is Devoted to Reading?

Watson (1980) conducted a study of the reading behavior of adults by surveying the leisure habits of 20,735 Canadians in 1978. Data were collected on the amount of time spent reading, people's reading preferences, the reasons for reading, the sources of reading material, and the attitudes toward book reading. It is clear that older people spend a lot of time reading. In the case of magazines and books, it is the working age population (ages 25-54) which spends the smallest number of hours per week reading, with both the younger and older readers spending about equally more. Watson found tastes in reading to be related to age as well. The elderly predominate in the readership of subjects related to the past (history, biography, religion, philosophy) while younger readers show a preference for action-oriented fiction such as science fiction and mysteries.[18]

A study was made by the public opinion polling firm of Yankelovich, Skelly, and White (1978) to profile the American book purchasing and

reading public. In all, 1450 people were surveyed, age 16 and over, in 165 U.S. cities. Characteristics of book readers *v.* nonbook readers are described. It was found that there is a drop-off in the incidence of book reading after the age of 50, and a more substantial drop in all types of reading after the age of 65. The "lightest" readers are those age 60 and over. The age group of over 65 represents approximately one-fourth of all nonreaders but only 13% of the total general population sampled. This finding may be explained, in part, by the lower educational attainment of those over 65 compared to those in younger groups.[19]

Sharon (1973) conducted a national survey of reading habits of a random sample of 5067 adults age 16 and older in order to determine what is read, by whom, for how long, and for what reason. He found that young adults tend to read more than older adults, while the very old spend the least in terms of average time spent reading each day, the 16-20 age group read the most (123 minutes), followed by those 30-59 (112 minutes), then the 21-29 age group (100 minutes), and lastly the 60 or older group (89 minutes).[20]

Are the Reading Interests and Habits of Oider Adults Different from Those of Younger Adults?

McLeod (1981) studied 3354 middle age (45-64) and older (65+) Canadian readers to determine the variety and frequency of books read. Suprisingly, McLeod found that older adults read more frequently than younger adults. The readers were divided into four groups depending on the time spent reading and the variety of books read: (1) light-narrow, (2) light-broad, (3) heavy-narrow, and (4) heavy-broad. As book readers grow older they tend to be found in the heavy-narrow and the heavy-broad categories. McLeod found there is an increase in the time spent reading books and a general narrowing in the variety of books read, as the readers' age increases.[21]

McElroy (1968) describes reading preferences based on a national survey of 1469 adults, 712 of whom were classified as readers. She found that relatively few older adults read but they read more varied materials than younger people. The proportion of readers in each age group decreases steadily with age—from 60% of those under 35 to 25% of those in the 64-74 age group. McElroy concludes that an early involvement in reading is likely to lead to a greater variety and quantity of reading in later years.[22]

A survey of the reading habits and interests of older adults was conducted by Rebottini (1979). She found that older adults are interested in the same types of reading material as the general adult population. Factors such as gender, education, and socio-economic levels have an effect upon reading interests. The survey results indicate that those who are better educated,

and of a higher socio-economic level read more books and magazines than those who are less well educated and on a lower socio-economic level.[23]

In her Ph.D. dissertation, Grubb (1982) investigated the reading interests of older adults in three Texas counties (Dallas, Denton, and Tarrant) by surveying 304 adults age 65 and older and 200 adults age 25-64. She concluded that the reading interests and activities of older adults do differ from younger adults; that the principal reasons given by older adults for not reading are failing vision and poor health; and that the principal types of materials read by older adults are newspapers and religious items. Comparing older adults with a college or higher education level to those with less education, 21% more of the educated group were readers (spending at least one hour a week reading). By contrast, among younger adults there was only an 8% difference between these two groups. Grubb also notes that the reading interests of older adults reflect characteristics of earlier life periods in which they were formed and that those interests tend to persist in later life.[24]

Ennis (1965) presents the results of a national survey of 1500 people sampled to assess book reading habits in the United States. He observed that people read fewer books as they grow older but that their reading of magazines remains virtually unchanged. Ennis investigated what causes readers to read less than usual or to give up reading altogether. He found that natural turning points in life, such as getting married, having a baby, and changing jobs, affect the amount and kind of reading. Perhaps retirement belongs in this list as well.[25]

Summary

Although one study (McLeod) reports an increase in the time spent reading as a person gets older, most studies agree that older adults read less than younger adults. Because no studies were found in the literature which actually trace the same individual's reading habits from middle age through old age, it may not be accurate to surmise that as people grow older, they necessarily read less. We can say, however, that older adults as a group spend less time reading than do younger adults.

In regard to the type of reading older adults prefer, they read fewer books but more magazines and newspapers than do younger adults. They prefer subjects related to the past—e.g., history, religion, westerns, and biographies are very popular. Older adults prefer to read light material such as romance, mysteries and short stories as opposed to action-packed novels

with confusing plots and many characters. Older adults, as a group, do not care for science fiction, or for books that contain violence or explicit sex.

Because several of the above mentioned studies deal with a select group of older adults, we cannot accurately project their findings onto the older adult population in general. The Weitkemper study on reading interests surveyed older adults who used the outreach services of a regional library. Although the reading preferences of these older adults seem to coincide with the findings of other studies, it should be remembered that these are users of outreach services and not the typical older adult public library user who is in the focus of this literature review.

The case study undertaken by Ngandu and O'Rourke used a select group of older adults —members of a senior citizen dining club —as the basis of their research. The same can be said of Ngandu's survey of senior citizens who were enrolled in a summer elderhostel. Elderhostels are live-in programs sponsored by colleges which provide courses and lectures for older adults; their members are usually more motivated and better educated than the general population and therefore not necessarily representative of older adult readers.

The study by Moshey of 50 middle-class and upper middle-class older adult readers is a rather small and select sample. In addition, the sample was composed of residents of a leisure retirement community and hospital patients. All these factors prohibit the findings from being projected to the older population as a whole.

The following three titles, which are cited in several other sections in this paper, also shed light on the question of reading preferences of older adults. The Yankelovich, Skelly and White *1978 Consumer Research Study on Reading and Book Purchasing* demonstrates a significant drop in the incidence of all types of reading among individuals over the age of 65. The previously mentioned 1978 study by Kenneth Watson is a thorough analysis of reading habits, preferences, and attitudes. The 1982 doctoral dissertation by Elizabeth Ann Grubb entitled "Reading Interests and Activity of Older Adults and Their Sense of Life" is useful for its frequent comparisons between older adults and younger adults, enabling the researcher to readily examine differences and similarities between age groups.

THE INFLUENCE OF EDUCATION ON LIBRARY USE

A review of the literature shows that older adults read less than younger adults. The next logical question is why? Variables such as race, sex, age, occuppation, and income level have been studied in connection with library use. But clearly the variable of educational attainment appears in the literature again and again as being one of the greatest factors in determining readers and public library users.

Can education then entirely explain why older adults read less, since they generally are less well-educated than their younger counterparts? The following studies and reports look at this question.

Hajda (1963) studied book reading in the United States by sampling 2000 households in the city of Baltimore and adjoining suburbs. He found that the amount of formal education was the most important factor in determining adult use of books. The study indicates that education is more than twice as important in explaining book reading as family income, and almost four times as important as occupational class. Hajda explains that there is a relative decline in book reading with age after a person reaches adulthood, because younger adults are better educated than older people. He found that a high school education was critical if individuals were to continue reading into adulthood.[26]

Kronus (1973) conducted a secondary analysis on data gathered from 2031 adults in a statewide sample in Illinois. Fourteen variables were analyzed (such as race, age, income, family size, etc.), to predict the rate of library use. It was found that the best predictor of library use was the respondent's level of education.[27]

The analysis shows that the expectation of continuing one's education is one result of education that clarifies the relationship between higher education and library use. Higher education gives the individual a "breadth of perspective" and an intellectual curiosity which in turn leads to selfmotivation and the desire to learn. Kronus concludes that the connection between youth and library use can be explained by the tendency of young adults to possess more education. Advancing age in and of itself has only a slight impact on library use.[28]

Ennis (1965) observes that education and reading go hand in hand; in terms of both books and magazines, the more education people have, the more they read.[29]

Grubb (1982) found education to be a stronger factor than age in determining who reads. She suggests that the effects of age on reading are possibly due to the lack of educational opportunities older adults had when they were of school age.[30]

The Illinois State Library Task Force for Library Services to the Aging conducted a survey in 1981 of 403 public libraries to determine the availability and content of library programs for the elderly within the state. It concluded that educational level may be the greatest hindrance to library participation by the elderly. Nearly three-fourths of adults age 60 and over in Illinois had in 1970 completed less than 12 years of school compared to 47% of persons age 25 to 64.[31]

Watson (1980) determined that there are changes in book reading with age in respect to education. He found that in six out of the seven cases in which book reading increases with age, it occurs among the university educated. He concludes that higher education seems to be capable of eliminating the general tendency for book reading to decline with age. Watson predicts that the trend for book reading as a whole to decline with age will diminish as university education becomes more widespread.[32]

Johnston and Rivera (1965) report on the 1962 National Opinion Research Center on the educational activities of adults based on interviews of 12,000 American households. When the education variable was held constant, it was found that 80% of those sampled in the survey who were under 35 and who were college educated were considered to be book readers. However, in the same college educated category, 77% of those 35-55 years of age were book readers, and only 60% of those over 55 were found to be book readers.[33]

This same relationship was found among respondents with only a high school education. Of those under 35, 70% were book readers compared to 52% of those 35-55 years old, and only 39% of those over 55. Of respondents whose education was confined to the grade school level, 61% of those under 35 were book readers, 31% between 35-55, and only 27% of those over 55. The findings indicate that while education is indeed important in determining book readers, there is still a decrease in book reading as people age.[34]

The Yankelovich, Skelly, and White Survey (1978) found a significant drop in the incidence of all types of reading among individuals over the age of 65. This finding may be explained in part by the lower educational attainment of those over 65 relative to those in younger age groups. However, the Yankelovich study determined that the book reader market

should not be confused with a "college educated market," because a majority (57%) of the book reader market actually consists of those who are high school graduates or less.[35]

In a recent survey of users of six Illinois public libraries, Lucas (1980) concluded that education is a stronger indicator of reading than is a person's economic level.[36] Nearly all the respondents in all six communities had completed at least a high school education. However, these libraries were selectively chosen on the basis of community size and location in and outside the Chicago metropolitan area, and cannot be considered to be a randomly selected user population.

Mizer (1975) studied two groups (students and nonstudents) age 50 years and older, to see if there was a difference between educationally active and noneducationally active older adults in reading and life satisfaction. She found that older adults who remain educationally active have a better self concept, are generally more satisfied with their lives, and are more proficient in silent reading.[37]

Summary

It seems clear from the literature that the level of educational attainment has a bearing on reading activity and use of the library by the older adult. The educational attainment of each generation is predictably higher than the preceding generation. Since the younger adults of today are better educated, they are more likely to use books and the public library when they become the senior citizens of tomorrow than do the older adults of today.

Reading, then, is probably more a function of education than of age. It is not because elderly adults' activities decline that they read less but rather because their skills are underdeveloped. However, the level of education cannot entirely account for the degree of library use or book reading among the elderly because when the level of education is held constant, there is still an apparent decrease in book reading as an individual ages.

Perhaps the two most important works found on education, reading and library use are by Kronus and Hajda. The 1973 study by Carol L. Kronus, "Patterns of Adult Library Use: A Regression and Path Analysis," provides statistical evidence that an individual's educational level is the main determining factor in predicting library use.[38] Jan Hajda's 1963 Ph.D. dissertation, "An American Paradox: People and Books in a Metropolis,"

found education to be the most important factor in determining an adult's use of books.[39]

USER AND NONUSER STUDIES

Old Age and Library Use

Very little research was found in the literature which pertains to older adults' use of public libraries. However, the literature is replete with user/nonuser studies, some of which contain data on older adults. What follows is a collection of studies and reports which shed light on the relationship between old age and library use.

The Cleveland Public Library commissioned the firm of Booz, Allen and Hamilton, Inc. to conduct a national survey on library services and the elderly. The resulting *National Survey of Library Services to the Aging* (1971) is a comprehensive analysis. Based on a sample of 266 public libraries, it was found that less than 4% of the nation's public libraries offered services to the aging in 1971 within the scope and definition of the study.[40]

The Gallup Organization conducted several public opinion polls on reading, books and the use of public libraries. *The Role of Libraries in America* (1976) polled 1561 adults age 18 and older through at-home interviews to study their attitudes and behavior concerning the use of the public library. The survey measured attitudes toward the public library of book users and nonusers. As expected, the same groups who are most likely to use a library tend more frequently to use the library: young people, the better educated, and professionals. Nonreaders, and therefore many times nonusers, occur most heavily among older, less educated groups. Of those interviewed, 47% of all public library users were age 18-34 compared to 28% of all nonusers; 28% of users were age 35-45 to 23% of the nonusers; and 25% of the users were 50, and older, compared to 49% of the nonusers. Lack of interest in reading or "not needing libraries" were the reasons most often given for not using libraries.[41]

Book Reading and Library Usage: a Study of Habits and Perceptions is a 1978 Gallup survey commissioned by the American Library Association. Telephone interviews were conducted with a repreentative national sample of 1515 adults age 18 years and over. The profile of a nonvisitor to the library echoes the 1976 survey: male, 50 years and older, and with a high school education or less.[42]

The Use and Attitudes Toward Libraries in New Jersey (1976) by Gallup reinforces the profile of respondents 50 years and older as making up the majority of nonusers of the public library. Interviews of 612 adults (18 and older) were done to determine their use of public libraries and other libraries; their reasons for using the library and their leisure life style patterns (including reading) were examined. It was found that 72% of adults age 50 and older had not visited the library in the past 12 months; 42% of the older adults queried preferred to buy books while 30% preferred to borrow them from the library. Older adults preferred most often to borrow current best sellers or books related to hobbies or leisure time activity. The least preferred books were those concerning the activities of clubs or organizations.[43]

Rohlf and others in 1981 reported on user and nonuser needs assessment of the public library systems of San Diego city and county. A total of 2464 questionnaires were processed; 1205 from the city and 1259 from the county. Among people over 60, almost twice as many were nonusers as users of the public library. In the city library system, 19.6% of the users were 61-80 years old compared to 23.9% of the nonusers. In the county library system, 15.1% of the users were 61-80 years old compared to 23.9% of the nonusers.[44]

Madden (1979) studied library user and nonuser lifestyles by analyzing the responses to one question in a national lifestyle study by the advertising agency of Leo Burnett. Answers to the question, "How frequently did you use the library in the last year?" were cross-analyzed by computer to determine the major characteristics of the users and nonusers. Users were split into two categories; the heavy users who visited the library 12 or more times a year and the moderate users who visited the library 1 to 11 times a year. The survey indicates that many senior citizens were not users of the library. On the other hand, a fairly large percentage of heavy users were senior citizens. A major conclusion of the Madden study is that library use is related to other activities; libraries are part of the lifestyle of active people.[45]

Carpenter (1979) reports on the 1971 North Carolina study of socioeconomic charateristics, media use and lifestyles of the public library patron. The sample consisted of just over 1000 responses from heads of households in North Carolina—243 were users of the public library and 765 were nonusers. Those over 50 were underrepresented in the library user population. Over half of the library user population was under 40 years of age. The heaviest users were those age 30-39 who comprised 28% of the user population, while the largest percentage of nonusers (21%) fell between the

ages of 50-59. Carpenter concludes that there were disproportionately large numbers of senior citizens who were not users of the library.[46]

The Myth and Reality of Aging in America is the report of a 1974 Louis Harris poll conducted for the National Council on the aging. The survey focuses on personal happiness and satisfaction, leisure time (including visits to the library), and perceived characteristics of older persons. There were 4254 respondents interviewed across America. Among the findings, 36% of the older adults questioned said they spent "a lot of time reading." Reading was the third most popular activity after "socializing with friends" and "gardening" and was equal in popularity to "watching TV."[47]

Those 65 and over considered a variety of facilities "less convenient" than did those under 65. Of the younger adults, 88% said there was a convenient library for them to use, compared with 63% of older adults who said the same. The college educated were more likely, however, to report a convenient library than the less well educated. Transportation problems often prevented the older adult from using the library.[48] (See the 1981 Louis Harris poll, *Aging in the Eighties: America in Transition*.[49])

Rountree (1979) reports on a study of 1046 New Orleans residents, 12 years and older, surveyed to assess user and nonuser interests; 6.9% of the users of the New Orleans Public Library were over 60 compared to 23.5% of nonusers.[50]

Bellassai and Palmour (1979) report the findings of a survey of 411 citizens of Louisville, Kentucky in conjunction with developing and testing a planning manual for public libraries. The data collected showed little library use by those over 55 years of age. Of the nonusers over age 55, 31% gave the reason for nonlibrary use as "nothing there I need." The primary source for books for older adults was purchase (56%), while only 16% indicated the public library as their major source for books.[51]

Watson (1980) found an unexpected complexity in the relationship between library use and age among Canadian adults. Library visiting decreases with age; however, the public library is an improtant source of books for older readers. Approximately 14% of older book readers got all their books from the public library.[52] This percentage of book borrowing may reflect the availability in the public library of large print books difficult to find through other sources, or the economic advantage the public library holds for persons on a fixed income.

Grubb (1982) studied the availability of library resources to, and the reading activity of, older adults. She wanted to identify the number of younger and older adults who use libraries as their chief source of reading materials. Her findings indicate that a variety of services are used, and that a higher percentage of older adults (39%) than younger adults (32%) rely on the library for books to read.[53]

Taylor and Johnson (1973) analyzed 48,500 questionnaire responses from two areas in Great Britain, South Cheshire/North Staffordshire and Lincoln. In proportion to their representation in the population as a whole, persons 65 years or older and children between the ages of 5 and 14 made the most use of public libraries.[54]

Summary

Most studies agree that, in general, older adults are not library users. One recent study (Rohlf) found twice as many nonusers among the elderly as users. In contrast, the British survey by Taylor and Johnson found that, in proportion to their percentage of the population, older adults and children between 5 to 14 years of age made the most use of the public library.[55]

Two studies found that library use decreases with age, but that the public library still remains an important source of books for the elderly. The Canadian study by Watson reported that approximately 14% of older adults rely on the public library as their major source for books. Another study (Grubb) found that 39% of older adults depend on the library for books to read. Factors which limit or prevent library use are transportation, lack of interest in reading, inactive lifestyles, and unavailability of library materials and services.[56]

For those who are interested in studying user and nonuser patterns among older adults, the following studies should be examined: Ray L. Carpenter's "The Public Library Patron," Michael Madden's "Lifestyles of Library Users and Nonusers," and Robert Rohlf's *Public Libraries in San Diego: A Study of the San Diego Public Library and the San Diego County Library* which provides important data on older adults. Also, the Gallup surveys are very helpful in profiling the users of public libraries.[57]

AGING, LIFE SATISFACTION AND READING

There are several theories of aging in the gerontological literature which explain aging from a sociological and psychological point of view (see

Neugarten 1968, Gubrium 1973, and Turock 1982).[58] The *Disengagement Theory* says that the aging individual withdraws socially and psychologically from his environment; the individual "disengages" from society and this process is mutually satisfying. Contradicting this theory, the *Activity Theory* holds that the level of activity of an individual is influenced by past lifestyles rather than the intrinsic process of aging. When roles are taken away from a person, that person compensates by increased activity in other areas. The *Continuity Theory* focuses on the persistence of personality traits that have been developed throughout the lifetime. These preferences become part of an individual's personality and, in growing older, the individual remains true to a pattern.

These concepts are useful in understanding life satisfaction among older adults. Does life satisfaction and a sense of well-being increase or decrease as people grow older? Is there a relationship between life satisfaction and activity? Do people tend to be happier if they are more active? And finally, is the activity of reading influenced by the aging adult's sense of well-being?

The following studies and articles touch upon the effect of reading on the aging process. Robinson and Maring (1976) review the literature on the aging process and its implications for reading. They briefly review three bibliographies on the aging process, three surveys related to research on the aging, three journals involved with various aspects of aging, seven studies on the reading interests and habits of older adults, and six studies involving book reading and/or library services to the older adult. Robinson and Maring mention three dissertations which investigate aspects of reading behavior and adjustment of older people. The authors conclude that the relationship of reading to the adjustment and/or disengagement of older adults has not been adequately explored.[59]

The purpose of Kanner's dissertation (1972) was to investigate the rate at which research-based information was introduced from gerontology to librarianship between 1946 and 1969. He surveyed gerontological concepts which appeared in library literature and found that they gained a foothold in librarianship between 1957 and 1962, during the time of the first White House Conference on Aging. Kanner predicts a continuing pattern of increased development of library services to the aged.[60]

Wolfe's Ph.D. dissertation (1963) explored the possible relationship between happiness and adjustment in the senior years, and learning and education during adulthood.[61] Wolfe interviewed a random sample of 251 adults, 65 years of age and older, using a standardized schedule *(Your*

Activities and Attitudes) which measured adjustment. A questionnaire was administered to 100 adults to determine their activities during adulthood and whether these activities were educational or provided recreation and entertainment. The reading of these subjects dealing with their occupations, world events, or home management was considered an educational experience; the reading of stories, novels, sports, and daily happenings was considered recreational and noneducational.

Wolfe found that good adjustment in the later years was significantly related to reading materials and participation in the activities selected as educational, but was not related to participation in recreational activities or to reading materials considered to be recreational. The study indicates that a strong relationship exists between the degree of adjustment older people make and the continued learning they had done during their adult years.[62] It demonstrates that the greater the number of books read, the greater the individual's adjustment.[63] The well adjusted older adult had done significantly more reading of books, magazines and newspapers than the poorly adjusted.

Hajda (1963) found that the decline in book reading between adolescence and adulthood is not a consequence of aging among adults but rather of social isolation which leads to the abandonment of books. Hajda concludes that isolation, loneliness and the lack of social integration have a negative impact on reading.[64] He argues that the more socially integrated an individual is the more he will read; when people are isolated from others outside their home they tend to abandon books. Hajda found that the extent of book reading is influenced by the frequency of visiting with other people (social integration) and the level of education: those who are externally oriented and more educated are consistently more likely to read books.

Grubb (1982) studied reading among older adults and its relationship to their sense of life satisfaction. She gathered data by administering the "Life Satisfaction Index Z" to a random sample of adults 25 years of age and older in the Dallas-Fort Worth area. The results indicate that positive life satisfaction scores of older adults are significantly related to their education, type of occupation, annual family income, amount of time spent in reading, and the variety of their reading interests.[65]

Groombridge (1964) surveyed 500 adults living in seven London boroughs regarding their use of the public library. He found that the number of library book borrowers decreased with increasing age. British people of pensionable age tend to withdraw from social life. Groombridge concludes

that, although going to the library is a more individual activity than belonging to a club, it exemplifies the same trend. The author indicates that limited education rather than the incapacity of old age accounts for limited library use on the part of older adults.[66]

Lucas (1982) investigated the range of life interests and reading interests on the part of adult users of the public library, using a nonrandom sample. The degree to which respondents were involved in activities which took them beyond the limits of the home and family affected their reading interests; social integration was shown to be an important factor in determining reading and library use.[67]

The 1981 Louis Harris poll, *Aging in the Eighties: America in Transition*, determined that as age increases, life satisfaction declines among those 65 and over. Life satisfaction, predictably, increases with educational level. Older Americans who continue to work have a higher life satisfaction score than those who have retired.[68]

Findings of the poll also show that, among the elderly, the percentage of those who spend a lot of their time reading has risen slightly (from 36% to 39%) since the 1974 Louis Harris study. In addition, people 65 and over visit the library more frequently than they did in 1974. Of those polled, 39% age 18-64 had used the library in the past three months compared with 19% of those age 65 and older. In the 1974 study, 44% of those age 18-64 had used the library in the past three months compared with 14% of those 65 and older.

Summary

Contrary to the popular belief that "bookworms" or heavy book readers are isolated, introverted individuals, two studies (Hajda and Lucas) have shown that the more active individuals are and the more integrated they are within society, the more likely they are to read. Two studies (Wolfe and Grubb) determined that an individual's sense of well-being and life satisfaction influence reading activity; a positive correlation has been found to exist between life satisfaction and educational level.

Since life satisfaction (Harris) and activity (Groombridge) generally tend to decrease with age, a sense of well-being and social integration within society needs to be considered in understanding older adults' use of books and the public library.

The reader is advised to examine Jan Hajda's "An American Paradox: People and Books in a Metropolis" for an interesting discussion and analysis of the relationship between book reading and life satisfaction. Linda Sue Lucas carries this relationship one step further in her 1980 Ph.D. dissertation, "The Ranges of Life Interests and Reading Interests Among Adult Users of Public Libraries in Communities of Various Sizes," and examines how the factor of social integration influences reading and public library use.

CONCLUSIONS

A review of the literature over the past 21 years indicates that older adults as a group do not read books or visit the public library as often as younger adults. Age in and of itself does not seem to be the reason.

Two factors, extent of formal education and sense of life satisfaction, clearly emerge as predominate forces in determining book reading and library use in the later years. Generally, book readers and library users are active people. The more educated the individuals, the greater their variety of interests and the greater their activity. Individuals with a sense of well being tend to be socially active in society and are more likely to read than those who are socially isolated and withdrawn from family and friends.

Ideas for Future Study

—Further study of the reading preferences of older adults is needed. Do they read what they tended to read when they were young; or now that they have more free time, do they read about new things? Do reading interests change? Do interests narrow as in the disengagement theory of aging?

—To determine if reading decreases with age, we need to trace reading habits from at least middle age through retirement. Is there a change in reading habits due to change in social role, perception of life, or biology of aging?

—Regarding the aging process, do older adults read at a slower pace than they did during middle age? This could contribute to a decrease in reading. If it takes them longer to read, they may well read fewer things.

—Related to the lack of education, one reason why older adults may not use the library as often as younger adults is because of their shyness or embarrassment in admitting they do not know how to do so.

—Is it true, as some studies suggest, that if older adults did not read in their middle age they will not read when old age provides them with additional leisure time? Most older readers learned to enjoy reading in their youth; very few older readers were nonreaders as young adults. Is there statistical evidence to support this hypothesis?

—Why do people continue to read the same number of magazines but fewer books as they get older? Is it because magazines require less concentration or because they have a familiar pattern?

—It appears that most people like to read what is familiar to them and are not adventuresome enough to explore new interests. Can older adults be induced to read more by their love of things in the past, by books which reinforce their memories?

—What is the relationship between extent of reading and adjustment to old age? Do people who read more (and have more education) have an easier time adjusting to and coping with the problems of old age (retirement, loss of social role, sickness, loss of family and friends, etc.)?

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The appendixes following this paper contain three bibliographies. Appendix A, "Related Research," includes research on the use of books and the public library by the older adult. Those citations not discussed in the literature review are briefly annotated here. The citations that are discussed above appear with an asterisk following the serial number.

Appendix B, "Other Relevant References," lists materials which touch peripherally upon the subject and may be of interest to those desiring a broader picture of older adults' reading habits. Since the focus of this study is on how older adults use books and the public library, publications dealing with library programs for older adults are not considered. However, for information on how the library serves the older adult, the reader is advised to consult Betty J. Turock's *Serving the Older Adult* and Virginia Mathews's 1981 White House Conference on the Aging Background Paper, *Libraries: Aids to Life Satisfaction for Older Women* (both cited earlier).

Appendix C, "Gerontological References," is a selected list of books and articles dealing with the psychological and sociological, rather than the biological, aspects of aging.

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